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Lawyer questions judge in Isaac case

February 16, 2007

By JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The attorney for a Canton man whose 2-year-old son was killed in foster care and who is trying to regain custody of two other children today questioned the judge in the case.

Attorney Robert Killewald asked Washtenaw County Family Court Judge Darlene O'Brien whether she could be fair and impartial in the case. He posed a series of questions after she said she had read coverage in the Free Press in January about the death of Isaac Lethbridge in a Detroit foster home.

O'Brien indicated she had read details of the paper's four-month investigation of the case. Killewald asked her if she could remain fair and impartial in deciding whether to return Isaac's two sisters to their birth parents, Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge.

"I certainly do, that's my job," O'Brien responded.

The girls — a 4-year-old and a 10-month-old — are in a foster home in Washtenaw County.

Today's hearing is to determine whether the request of the state Department of Human Services to terminate the parental rights of Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge to the youngest child will be granted. It also will determine a long-term plan for the 4-year-old, who is still recovering from the trauma of being in the foster home with Isaac when he was fatally beaten and burned.

The children's attorney, F. Joy Gaines, clarified that she is not calling for reunification of the family. That decision will rest on the evidence presented and O'Brien's ruling.

The parents had a positive visit with their older daughter on Thursday, according to DHS foster care worker Scott Virgo. The parents do not have visitation with the younger girl, who was placed in foster care after her birth last April.

The Lethbridges had nine children, all of whom were placed in foster care on complaints of neglect. The couple's parental rights to the six oldest children were terminated in 2001 and 2002. Those children were adopted by three other families.

In testimony today, Jennifer Lethbridge, 30, was asked by her attorney, Kathleen Brown, what she could have done differently with the six children she lost permanent custody of.

"I want to go back in time and slap myself in the head. I was very irresponsible," Jennifer Lethbridge, who is about seventh months pregnant with her 10th child, said. Brown also asked her whether people could trust her to take care of her children again.

"Anyone who trusts me enough to give me a chance would not be disappointed," Jennifer Lethbridge said. "I will do what it takes to keep them healthy and happy and safe."

She also said she and her 33-year-old husband made many complaints to authorities about the care Isaac and his sister were getting in the home licensed through the Lula Belle Stewart Center of Detroit. She said the children came to visits bruised, scraped and dirty.

"We had a lot of complaints about Lula Belle," Jennifer Lethbridge said, saying they went to Child Protective Services, the Children's Ombudsman Office and the governor's office. "No one was listening," she said.

Brown also asked her about the allegation that her 4-year-old daughter may have been sexually molested while in foster care.

"I feel angry but more than that I feel so hurt for her...that is one of the worst ways you can ever hurt a child," Jennifer Lethbridge said.

Testimony was to continue this afternoon.

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February 17, 2007

Are parents fit to reunite with kids?

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

ANN ARBOR -- Two mental health professionals offered differing views Friday in the case of a couple seeking reunification with two of their daughters in the wake of the death of their 2-year-old son in a foster home.

The Washtenaw Family Court hearing was to determine whether Matt and Jennifer Lethbridge will be reunited with their daughters, ages 4 and 10 months, or stay in foster care.

The Michigan Department of Human Services has recommended that the Lethbridges' parental rights to their infant daughter be terminated. The couple, who live in Canton Township, has been working to reunite with their 4-year-old daughter, who was in the Detroit foster home where Isaac Lethbridge was beaten to death in August. They are also trying to get custody of the 10-month-old. Both girls are in a Washtenaw County foster home.

"They've made significant progress," said Celestine Brown, a social worker. "The children should be returned home, with in-home services."

But Joshua Ehrlich, a clinical psychologist, testified that he met Jennifer Lethbridge four times and concluded that she failed to take responsibility for her behavior and blamed others for her situation. The Lethbridges have lost their rights to six of their children over the past decade because of neglect. Lethbridge is seven months pregnant with her 10th child.

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Mother of slain son pleads for daughters' return

February 17, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A Washtenaw County judge heard conflicting testimony Friday about the ability of a Canton Township mother whose nine children were placed in foster care to handle the return of two of them.

Jennifer Lethbridge, 30, testified that she wanted "to go back in time and slap myself in the head" for losing her children over complaints about neglect and filthy homes.

"Anyone who trusts me enough to give me a chance would not be disappointed," Lethbridge said of reunification. "I will do what it takes to keep them healthy and happy and safe."

Lethbridge's 2-year-old son Isaac was killed Aug. 16 while in a state-licensed foster home in Detroit. His death was the subject of a three-part series in the Free Press in January that documented failings in the state child welfare system.

Six of Lethbridge's older children were placed in foster care in 2001 and 2002 and later adopted. Now, Lethbridge and her husband, Matt Lethbridge, 33, are seeking to regain custody of their 10-month-old and 4-year-old daughters. The couple also are expecting a 10th child.

A court-appointed clinical psychologist who evaluated Jennifer Lethbridge testified Friday that she shows "a stunning lack of self-reflection and unwillingness to take responsibility for her own behavior."

Joshua Ehrlich said "the likelihood that she could benefit from psychotherapy is extremely small given her personality." In a report, he said her severe personality disorder causes her to blame others for her problems.

Celestine Brown, a social worker who has counseled the Lethbridges since June, said she believes Jennifer Lethbridge's personality disorder is not severe and the couple recognize the mistakes of the past. Brown said she recommends reunification.

Washtenaw County Family Court Judge Darlene O'Brien scheduled the next hearing for March 30.

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Published February 18, 2007

Mom who lost custody of 9 kids pleads to get 2 back

Pregnant woman, 30, says she will keep kids 'happy'

By Jack Kresnak
Special to the State Journal

A Washtenaw County judge heard conflicting testimony Friday about the ability of a Canton Township mother whose nine children were placed in foster care to handle the return of two of them.

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Article published Feb 16, 2007

Couple sentenced for abusing infant

By tiffany L. Parks
Staff Writer

A Canton Township couple has been sentenced to prison time and probation for their roles in abusing their infant son last year.

The child's father, Steven Michael Szyszkowski, will serve up to four years in prison for second-degree child abuse. Szyszkowski, 26, originally faced up to 15 years. He was sentenced earlier this month after pleading no contest to seriously injuring his five-week-old son in December.

Doctors determined the child, who was placed in foster care, suffered various injuries, including nine broken bones.

The child's mother, Jayme Beth Stratton, was sentenced to two years probation in late January.

While police didn't believe that Stratton, 36, struck the child, they said she maintained an environment of abuse.

The couple were arrested after police received an anonymous tip about the abuse.

"All of us have said that caller saved this baby's life," said Canton Detective Rick Pomorski. "This was a prime example of how people should act when they suspect abuse."

Even if a child shows no outward signs of abuse, Pomorski said people should follow their instincts and alert police if they feel a child is being hurt.

"People should never think they're wasting our time or feel guilty about calling," he said.

The couple's son, who had broken toes and a broken tibia, was expected to make a full recovery.

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Father Accused Of Abuse

POSTED: 5:52 pm EST February 16, 2007

UPDATED: 7:52 pm EST February 16, 2007

PITTSFIELD TOWNSHIP, Mich. -- A Pittsfield Township man is in jail Friday, accused of shaking his daughter.

Washtenaw County prosecutors have charged Everge Dickens with first-degree child abuse.

They said that in October, he shook his 11-month-old daughter hard enough to cause brain damage.

Right now, it's not known if the damage is permanent.

Dickens told police his daughter fell off the bed while he was in the shower.

Dickens was convicted as a juvenile in 2001 for shaking his infant brother to death.

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Published February 17, 2007

Howell dad sentenced to prison for sex assault

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Special to the State Journal

A Howell father who made his family take "baby steps through hell" was sentenced Thursday for sexually assaulting his daughter after he climbed into her bed to teach her about boys and sex.

The 40-year-old man's daughter said since the Oct. 4 incident, she has learned that her father has molested other girls for the past 26 years - incidents that came to light after the daughter reported what happened to her.

She said she wanted her father to be "locked up for a long time."

"He is a sick, evil predator, and he needs to be off the streets," the teenage girl said.

Livingston County Circuit Judge David Reader sentenced the man to 38 months to 15 years in the Michigan Department of Corrections.

The defendant pleaded guilty in December to second-degree criminal sexual conduct for inappropriately touching his daughter when he climbed into her bed with her. When asked if he did it for sexual gratification, the father said, "It wasn't for that," while acknowledging the behavior was still inappropriate.

The Daily Press & Argus is not naming the father because it could identify his daughter.

From the Livingston Daily Press Press & Argus

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Published February 17, 2007

State awaits changes in sex offender registry

Feds working on standardization, assigning duties

By Erik Adams
Capital News Service

A Senate bill would amend the state's 1994 sex offender registry law to follow federal registry requirements.

But unfortunately, federal officials haven't revealed those requirements.

The bill would expand information about ex-cons on the State Police public sex offender registry to include details about vehicles they own, their places of employment and convictions for other crimes.

2006 mandate

That would comply with a 2006 federal mandate that requires standardization of information in state registries so they can be integrated into the National Sex Offender Registry.

However, the U.S. Justice Department hasn't announced what standardization would entail. It's up to that department to read what Congress ordered and determine exactly what it means, said Sgt. Matt Bolger, legislative liaison for the State Police.

"Federal law is nowhere near as easy to read as state law is," he said.

"We're kind of waiting on that determination from the Department of Justice on what our duties are going to be."

Once those duties have been determined, Michigan lawmakers can amend state law to comply, Bolger said.

Sen. Wayne Kuipers, R-Holland, is the bill's sponsor. Darin Ackerman, Kuipers' chief of staff, said the legislation is intended to get a jump on the federal regulations.

Changes anticipated

The Senate Judiciary Committee won't take action on the bill until the regulations are announced, at which point any necessary changes will be made, he said.

In January, the State Police launched a new version of the Michigan registry that features the anticipated changes.

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Bolger said offenders are not yet required to provide the additional information and that his agency hasn't been collecting it.

'Coming soon'

"There are some data on there, like registration details - last verification date, date of initial registration, date of registration expiration - those all show 'coming soon,' " Bolger said.

Shelli Weisberg, legislative director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan, said the additional information could create problems for individuals other than those in the registry, such as employers.

"It would be unfortunate if an employer chose to hire someone who's on the registry - because there are so many people who are on the registry who are not dangerous and would be fabulous employees - because having the employer's place of business connected to that registry would most likely cause hardship to the employer," she said.

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Officials to decide future of 5-year-old

Saturday, February 17, 2007

By Lisa Medendorp
Gazette News Service

MUSKEGON -- Everyone wants what's best for Marisa.

The 5-year-old girl, discovered alone with her deceased mother Sunday, is in the temporary custody of the Michigan Department of Human Services, according to Muskegon County's Family Court. Confidentiality laws prevent authorities from saying where Marisa is currently staying.

Tina M. Tietz, 39, was found dead in their Fruitland Township home. A preliminary finding from an autopsy indicates she died from bacterial meningitis.

Marisa Tietz was alone for an undetermined number of days with her mother's body.

Authorities said they cannot yet say how long the girl was alone.

The little girl rummaged through cupboards and anywhere else she could find food to eat.

The interior of the home was in shambles when police forced entry after a friend, Michelle Schnotala, went to the residence. She was concerned because Tina Tietz had not returned messages left on her cell phone.

Schnotala, 39, said she last spoke to her friend the night of Feb. 3, eight days before Tina Tietz was found, and she had complained of a severe headache and earache.

Now it will be up to Family Court to determine where Marisa will live.

A preliminary hearing held Monday left the child in the temporary care of DHS. A prehearing conference has been set for Friday.

Paul Wishka, deputy family division court administrator, said with Marisa's mother dead and the man believed to be her biological father in prison, the state filed a petition with the court indicating the child is ``without proper custody and guardianship."

Marisa and her mother lived alone in the house.

Marisa has a number of relatives, including her maternal grandparents, Jerry and Linda Miller, of Mears.

Any number of things could happen at Friday's conference, Wishka said.

It may be decided the Muskegon County Prosecutor's Office and DHS might feel there is no need for the court to be involved. It might be ``that the child has a relative who can step forward and care for her," Wishka said.

Muskegon County Prosecutor Tony Tague said his office represents DHS in Family Court custody matters.

``Everyone's concern is to ensure the safety of the child and to see that she is placed in a safe, productive environment," he said. ``The court and my office attempt to place a child with relatives whenever possible."

Wishka said, ``We want to put children in the most family-like environment. Ideally, it's with a relative who has the ability to protect and nurture the child."

No immediate funeral service is planned for Tina Tietz, who is originally from Hart. A graveside service will be held in the spring.

Tina Tietz has another daughter, Jenna, 15, who is living with Tina Tietz's husband, Norman Tietz, in the Montague area, authorities said.

Marisa's father is identified on a Muskegon County Sheriff's Department report as Robert Michael Collins, 26. Collins is currently at Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility in Muskegon. He is serving a long sentence for the 2003 armed robbery of a Norton Shores gas station/convenience store and the attempted robbery while armed of a Muskegon Heights liquor store.

Both incidents occurred the same day, and the prosecutor's office said at the time they were drug-related.



Muskegon Chronicle

Health issues didn't derail girl's survival

Saturday, February 17, 2007

By Heather L. VanDyke

hvandyke@muskegonchronicle.com

Five-year-old Marisa Tietz was born with a hole in her heart and spent a good part of her young life in the hospital. Health issues resulted in the little girl developing "slower" than other kids her age, says one family member.

But Marisa proved she wasn't lacking survival skills last week after living several days alone in her Fruitland Township home with the body of her mother, Tina M. Tietz, 39, who apparently died from bacterial meningitis.

Marisa, who was discovered Sunday, is in temporary custody of the Michigan Department of Human Services, according to an official with Muskegon County's Family Court.

Tina Tietz's aunt, Marlene Frontiera, called the little girl a "survivor" -- just like her mother who raised her alone.

"Marisa was so much like her mother," said Frontiera, of Hart. "I think she was trying to take care of her mom. She thought her mother was sleeping and she just had that survival instinct."

Authorities said they cannot yet say how long the girl was alone in her home at 5700 W. Michillinda, but have narrowed it down to between three and eight days.

"Tina loved her daughter extremely," Frontiera said. "She sacrificed a lot for her. She was divorced and taking good care of her little girl."

Marisa's ongoing health problems made caring for the little girl even more difficult at times, Frontiera said.

"Marisa had a hole in her heart when she was born and she was in the hospital for the first couple of years of her life. She was very, very ill," Frontiera said. "Tina was a good mother, she did everything she could. She got the best doctors for Marisa, but she still has some sort of health problems."

Marisa was discovered alone on Sunday after Tina Tietz's friend, Michelle Schnotala, went there out of concern for Tina Tietz, who failed to return messages left on her cell phone. Schnotala could not be reached for comment Friday.

Photos of the Tietz home released by the Muskegon County Sheriff's Department show the house was a disaster when authorities arrived. The family dog was tied up and had made a mess in a back room, and it appears Marisa had rummaged through the home looking for food to eat.

Broken eggs were on the kitchen table, dry-food mix was spilled on the dining room floor and empty food boxes were scattered about the home.

Schnotala, 39, told authorities she last spoke to her friend the night of Feb. 3, eight days before Tina Tietz was found, and she had complained of a severe headache and earache. Marisa has not shown any physical signs that she has developed meningitis herself, according to authorities.

It will be up to Family Court to determine where Marisa, whose father is incarcerated, will live. A preliminary hearing Monday left the child in the temporary care of DHS. A prehearing conference has been set for Feb. 23.



Delinquent parent dealt felony charge

Attorney general charges man who owes \$56,000 in back support

By Jameson Cook
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

An Eastpointe man who owes more than \$50,000 in child support and is charged with a felony for late payments says the charge is unfair and can only make the situation worse for everyone involved.

Corey Flener, 35, faces a hearing next month in Macomb County Circuit Court in front of Judge Tracey Yokich for failing to make payments in a timely manner to his ex-wife, Tammy Flener, for their three children, ages 9 to 12. The offense is a 5-year felony.

Flener admitted to The Macomb Daily he has done some things wrong and at times hasn't kept up with payments but says he has "paid down" his arrearages, doling out tens of thousands in the past 3 1/2 years. He said the criminal charge is overkill and will only provide another obstacle to paying.

"Does the judge want to put him in jail and out of work?" said Flener's attorney, Jacob Femminineo. "She won't get anything if he goes to jail."

Since a September 2003 order setting his payments, he has paid \$9,000 beyond required, officials said in court, according to court records.

Judge Sebastian Lucido of 41B District Court in Clinton Township expressed some skepticism about the charge before he allowed the case to proceed to circuit court.

"I'm going to bind this case over, but I would hope that that (late payments) would be taken into consideration -- that there very well may have been paid, just not timely," the judge said from the bench Dec. 12, according to court records.

The criminal case is being prosecuted by the state Attorney General's Office, not the Macomb Prosecutor's Office, which pursues "several" arrearage criminal cases per month on request of the county Friend of the Court, according to Ben Liston, prosecutors office chief of staff. The prosecutor's office did not receive a request for a warrant from the Macomb FOC.

Matt Frendewey, spokesman for Attorney General Mike Cox, said his office holds the discretion to charge someone, and noted Flener's high arrearage of \$56,600 and multiple months of missed payments. The case was referred to his office by the county FOC office, he said.

"He's left us no other choice to charge him with a felony," Frendewey said.

Frendewey said Flener is only one of many delinquent parents who have been charged by his office. In 2006, Cox's office gained 826 warrants against late payers, 23 of them in Macomb County involving 36 children, Frendewey said.

Cox announced a crackdown on delinquent child support payers when he took office in 2003. Since then, Cox's office has collected \$27 million from deadbeat parents for 3,187 children statewide.

During the district court hearing assistant attorney general Tim Flynn said that his office only must show that Flener made one late payment, noting Flener missed four monthly payments in 2006. Flener paid a total of \$8,850, which is below the total of \$12,060 (\$1,005 per month) for current support and \$3,600 (400 per month) to the debt, as ordered by Yokich in September 2003. The amount of arrearage also increases with interest, 1 percent above the prime rate, although the rate at one time during his accumulated debt had been fixed at 8.5 percent.

"His arrearage is huge," Flynn told the judge. "I feel for the defendant. It's a tough economy. But the fact is the man was ordered to pay and he has been woefully short."

Catherine Cole, a lawyer with the county Friend of the Court office and judicial service officer, testified at district court for the prosecution.

"While Mr. Flener has substantially complied with his current support, he hasn't substantially complied with the court's order," she testified.

Flener was subject to eight circuit-court show-cause hearings from 2003 to 2005, and has spent some time in the Macomb County Jail for failure-to-pay civil judgments. A contempt order was set aside last August when he came to court with \$2,000.

He has also had tax-return funds seized from him.

Femminineo, Flener's attorney, criticized the Attorney General's Office for over-aggressively pursuing the case, over-reacting to constant badgering by Tammy Flener.

"This is a classic case of, 'The squeaky wheel gets the grease,'" Femminineo said. "We have a person that is constantly complaining about the amount of support."

"She thinks it's all a game," Corey Flener said of his ex-wife.

Tammy Flener, who lives in Ithaca, did not respond to an interview request through her attorney, Steve Vernier.

Femminineo said the "horrible economy" has contributed to his client's troubles.

Flener is self employed, doing residential remodeling. He said his business activity goes in cycles of busy and slow times, meaning income can vary month-to-month. He also must pay subcontractors, he said.

Flener also said some confusion during divorce proceedings contributed to his arrearage quickly rising to \$45,000. He said he did not receive notice in 1999 that his divorce had been finalized during which time the child-support debt began accumulating.

Tammy Flener has custody and Corey has visitation rights. The couple has sparred over visitation issues, as well.

Femminineo said that he can show Flener has paid \$24,000 since the last order was made in September 2003, although Flener said he has paid much more than that in child support and alimony, including some direct payments to his ex-wife that have gone unrecorded.

He said he also missed some payments at one point last year when he fell into a depression due to his legal problems and financial challenges.

He has remarried and has two more children aged 4 and 5, plus two stepchildren, that he must support. That makes finances tight, as he has a total of six biological children. He has a 16-year-old daughter from a prior relationship.

"I work day and night, and I don't have enough to put food in my refrigerator," he said.

A felony offense and significant jail sentence will only harm both of his families, he said.

"I don't want to be a felon," he said. "I'm trying to be a role model for my kids."

Femminineo, who handles many domestic cases as part of his Mount Clemens practice, said he wonders about a law that gives so much discretion to prosecutors to charge fathers and mothers who fall behind on child-support payments.

"I guess whenever there's a person that misses one child support payment, they can be charged with a 5-year felony," he said.

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Child support laws unfair to "duped dads"

By Derrick K. Baker / MCT
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2007

Perhaps the fact that I manage money well and enjoy women are the reasons for my strong reaction to cases in which men have to continue paying child support for a child after it's determined that they didn't father the child.

Maybe because I continue to evolve into a more compassionate adult and a diehard advocate for men's rights, I've also developed an equally evolving notion of financial fairness, the absolute truth and parental rights.

Could it be that I've become so cynical and skeptical when it comes to relationships and marriages that, when it comes to kids, I doubt and disbelieve much of what comes out of a woman's mouth?

My gumbo of emotions notwithstanding, who among us hasn't formed some opinions about an issue that is taking a more prominent role in how families are maintained or dissolved; how marriages are sustained or broken; and how children view themselves and the roles of adults in their lives - not to mention the primary issue of a child's best interests.

Here's the issue: If a man believes or is lead to believe by the woman that he has sired a child by her, but it's later proved by DNA testing that the man is not the father, should he legally or morally continue paying child support?

On one side are people who support these men - known in some circles as "duped dads" _ and believe that at the end of the day the men are fraud victims. Think of buying an expensive stereo only to find out that inside are cheap, poorly made components.

While that's a terrible comparison that likens human life to consumer products, you get the point.

According to a recent illuminating article in Time magazine, "the law's marital presumption of fatherhood has ended up enslaving a divorced dad, like the Michigan man who proved he had not sired his son but was still ordered to send child-support payments directly to the boy's biological father, who was granted custody after the mom moved out of his place and left the kid there."

Then there's the case of 36-year-old Dylan Davis, a software engineer in Denver, who questioned the paternity of his 6-year-old twins. A negative DNA test proved he wasn't the father. His ex-wife moved and while he no longer has contact with the kids, "under Colorado law he is still required to pay \$663 a month in child support."

Davis isn't taking the lie and law lying down; he's working to change the state's statute so he and other men in his predicament don't have to shell out money for kids who aren't their own _ at least biologically.

The emotional connection between dad and kids, however, is another story. And it's a story that cannot be overlooked or downplayed, particularly in the black community where single-parent homes are common.

Furthermore, consider the case of Georgia engineer Carnell Smith, "who found out soon after he broke up with his girlfriend that she was pregnant and spent the next 11 years believing he was the girl's father. Then, in 2000, after his visitation time had been cut back around the same time that a court order nearly doubled his monthly child-support payments, he took a test that showed he was not the biological parent."

If that's not life-changing news for all involved, what is?

After spending three years and six figures in fees, Smith ("a broke but free man") no longer is financially responsible for the child but is responsible for the new DNA testing company he founded as a result of his experience.

How deep must be the wide-ranging emotions that surface when a man finds out that a child isn't his? What a challenge for both parents to now redefine their relationship with each other, and how _ if at all _ to tell the child the truth.

The way I see it, if a man has serious doubts about the paternity of his child _ and not just misgivings about the quality and future of the relationship with the child's mother _ then he should pursue the truth.

If a mother secretly knows she has her own questions and doubts about her child's paternity, she would be unwise, to put it mildly, to display shock that the man is seeking the truth.

Ladies, be prepared to face the facts, the truth and the consequences. Gentlemen, don't ask a question that may deliver an answer you're ill-prepared to hear.

Children's advocates sitting on the other side of the argument contend that what remains most paramount, however, is the child's best interests. For a child, learning that a man he called "Dad" for years really is not his father can be as convoluted as the circumstances that led to the child's birth.

Learning of such likely will prompt a child to question both parents' honesty, and depending on the quality and duration of the relationship to the father, plant seeds of doubt about men as a whole.

Nevertheless, show me a man who doesn't want to know if a child is really his and I'll show you a man who isn't one.



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02/16/2007

News in Brief

No one injured in Petoskey fire

PETOSKEY — A 5-year-old girl allegedly set fire to her house, apparently in an effort to be reunited with an older sister, officials said.

No one was injured in the Wednesday night fire at a home in Bear Creek Township and the fire was contained to a laundry room, Resort/Bear Creek Fire Chief Al Welsheimer said. One of the family's dogs died of smoke inhalation, however, he said.

The girl, who was in foster care at the home with a 6-year-old sister, apparently set the fire after she received a Valentine's Day card from a 10-year-old sister who had been placed in a different home.

"They would be together again if they didn't have a house to live in (because of the fire), that's what she told her," Welsheimer said.

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Article published Feb 17, 2007

Anonymous volunteer donates 300 duffel bags

An anonymous volunteer donated 300 duffel bags to the Monroe County Department of Human Services for area foster children to carry their belongings when they are removed from their homes.

Dot Stacy, associate director of Monroe County Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, said when kids are removed from homes they carry their belongings in garbage bags.

An anonymous CASA volunteer donated the bags because she wanted the children to gain back their dignity.

"She thought they shouldn't be reduced to carrying around their belongings in a garbage bag," Ms. Stacy said. "The kids are the victims here and she thought the duffel bags would give the kids some self-respect."

Ms. Stacy said each bag will have a place for the child's name and the CASA phone number in case the child would need to call.

The volunteer spent the last six months planning her donation. She used her own funds and ordered enough bags to last the program for a couple of years, Ms. Stacy said.

"She saw a need and wanted to see what she could do to help out," she said. "I just think it is such a generous and thoughtful gift. Our volunteers are such generous people."

Ms. Stacy said the duffel bags are a good opportunity for both CASA and DHS to work together.

"Our partnership shows the community how much we all care about the children," she said. "We are out to protect the child's best interests."

Terry Beurer, director of the DHS, said the department was pleased with the donation.

"We were ecstatic," he said. "Often times, kids come into foster care with nothing and now the child has something that is their own property, it's something to hang on to."

He said the DHS provides the children with toiletries and other personal items to travel to the foster home. The duffel bags will be stored in both the office and in all DHS vehicles, so if there is a pick-up during non-business hours, workers can hand out the bags.

"We are very grateful for the donation especially in times of tight budgets," Mr. Beurer said. "It is a little something extra we can do now because of the generosity of someone in the community." According to its Web site, CASA is a volunteer operation of trained citizens who have been appointed by a family division judge. The volunteers provide assistance and are the voice for the best interested of abused or neglected children. For more information about CASA, visit www.casami.org.



Day-care centers may have to report investigations

Tuesday, February 20, 2007

By Kameel Stanley

The Grand Rapids Press

Licensed day-care facilities would be required to notify parents within 24 hours of becoming the target of a high-risk investigation, under legislation unanimously approved in the state Senate.

Last year, that would have meant notifying parents of children at 14 day-care centers in Kent County for suspected cases of serious abuse -- 74 across the state.

"I think this is a very valid change," said Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, who sponsored the bill. "It gives the parent the option of withdrawing the child or not."

The legislation is now pending in a House committee.

High-risk investigations include situations in which abuse or neglect is the suspected cause of a child's death or results in severe physical injury, or if a child is the suspected victim of sexual abuse or exploitation.

That would have applied to the case of Kristopher Cross, whose license to operate a Grand Rapids day-care center with his wife was renewed by the state, despite sexual abuse allegations and the discovery of child porn on his computer.

Hardiman responded to the Cross case last year by holding a hearing in Lansing to study whether changes in state laws and policies were needed.

"That was the genesis" for the legislation, Hardiman said today. "We believe we need to protect our children."

Cross was accused of sexually assaulting three girls, ages 5 to 7, at the home on Fuller Avenue NE between 2001 and 2004, though charges weren't filed until September 2005. The first allegation was made in January 2002 by a 4-year-old girl, but police didn't believe she was a credible witness and didn't seek charges.

By February 2005, after a second allegation, police had determined that images found on his computer at the day-care center were child porn. Prosecutors didn't file charges until after a third child came forward in August 2005.

Parents weren't initially notified of the investigation. Cross was sent to prison.

Currently, child-care providers are required to inform parents of high-risk investigations only if the investigation results in the loss of the provider's license.

Last year, Allegan and Ottawa counties had two high-risk cases each, Ionia County had five and Newaygo County had one. Barry and Montcalm counties had no high-risk investigations.

Advocates of the legislation acknowledge mandatory notification could result in a tarnished reputation or even loss of business for accused centers. Still, parents have a right to know, said Maureen Sorbet, DHS spokeswoman, whose agency supports the bill.

"It will result in prompt notice to parents," Sorbet said.

Increasing the protection for children is the goal of the bill, Hardiman said.

If only it were that simple, says Janice Rhodes, owner of Alphabet Soup Day Care Center, at 1708 Leonard St. NE.

While Rhodes agrees it is important to keep people informed in extreme cases, she says sometimes allegations "just aren't true."

The minute someone said the word "investigation," parents would start pulling their kids, she said.

"I hear what they're saying, but ... I just don't know where that fine line would be, and it would hurt people and hurt business," said Rhodes, who has been a day care provider for 12 years.

"Parents get so worked up, and it could be nothing."

The real problem, Rhodes said, is the state's licensing system. Child care providers aren't getting the support they need, she said.

Not all high-risk investigations result in convictions or licenses being pulled, Sorbet said. Some centers are cleared of charges, she said.

But the pros of the legislation outweigh the cons, say Hardiman and Sorbet.

"Children are our most vulnerable citizens, and they count on us to protect them," Hardiman said.

He points to the bill's built-in penalties for false claims and for child-care organizations that don't inform parents.

Those who make a false claim that results in a high-risk investigation face a \$4,000 fine.

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Detroit News Letters

Tuesday, February 20, 2007

Verdict on Abraham aid

According to Frank Beckmann, Nathaniel Abraham's defense attorney commented that the state's plan for rehabilitation was a great "social experiment." I agree wholeheartedly ("Public should be told more on Pfizer, Abraham decisions," Jan. 26). It will show how well the Michigan Department of Human Services planned its rehabilitation program for its juvenile offenders (being that the juvenile is receiving almost no parental guidance).

This "experiment" (given the outcome) will prove that not all first-time offenders are total thugs and that mistakes do happen.

Bonita Grier

Detroit



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Published February 17, 2007

Staying warm doesn't come cheap: Propane users hurt most by cost of heat

By Christine Rook
Lansing State Journal

Thursday's high temperature of 16 degrees was half the normal high for February, chilling hope for some that this year's winter heating bills would be less than last.

Most hurt will be the thousands of people across mid-Michigan who rely on propane to heat their homes; electricity users will be less affected.

Those who rely on natural gas and heating oil actually may see costs decrease.

The reason for the mixed effect is propane and electricity have risen in price compared with last year, according to federal reports, while natural gas and heating oil prices have fallen.

Propane is often the heating fuel of choice in rural areas, experts say.

"When it's good and cold, the customers go through it like water," said John Baumer, who has worked 11 years for Lansing Ice & Fuel.

The company distributes propane to about 3,000 customers, and Baumer is a propane user himself.

The average propane bill in the Midwest this winter is expected to hit \$1,220, according to this month's report from the federal Energy Information Administration. That amount is almost 35 percent higher than the average bill for winters during 2000 through 2005.

Temperatures hovered near 50 degrees in the early part of January, with winter weather finally



(Photo by Rod Sanford/Lansing State Journal)
Washing off the salt, ice and grime: Sarah Bauer, of Lansing, is surrounded by steam as she cleans her car Friday at a self-car wash in the cold in Lansing. With Thursday's temperature half the normal high for February, odds are the car won't stay clean for long.

By the numbers

\$1,220

amount the average Midwesterner is expected to pay this winter for propane heating fuel - about \$40 more than last year.

\$1,081

amount the average Midwesterner is likely to pay this winter for heating oil, about \$35 less than a year ago.

\$825

average natural gas bill in the Midwest this winter, down \$194 from a year ago.

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration

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- [Weak El Nino dashes mild winter hopes](#)

arriving mid-month. By the end of January, state officials were paying \$1 million a week in crisis assistance to help people pay their heating bills, said Maureen Sorbet, spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services.

Natural gas users were spared some of the pain. They are expected to spend \$825 this winter, almost \$200 less than the year before. Those who rely on oil likely will pay about \$1,081, \$35 less.

Propane users won't suffer alone, though. The average bill for people who heat with electricity is expected to be \$825, or about \$35 more than last year.

"There's a lot of money we're going to take all summer to collect," said Marvin Swan, co-owner of Swan Fuel Service in Dansville.

Baumer has seen his annual energy bill rise about \$1,500 since 2001. That's because the price of propane, he said, has almost doubled. He's coped by spending less on other things.

"That many fewer times you buy clothing," he said. "That many times fewer you go out to eat."

Contact Christine Rook at 377-1261 or clrook@lsj.com.

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By HENRY ERB

Julie and Brent Baldrige

They were initially unable to get housing assistance because they had no income and no prospect of getting a place to live.

They also got help from Michigan Works, the state's job help program. Michigan Works helped them put together their resumes in their hunt for new work.

They contacted Fulton Sheen, their state representative, and a staff member tracked their case with state agencies. Sheen also put them in touch with some voluntary church assistance. He said churches should play a greater role in helping people with such problems. "Government doesn't have all the answers," Sheen said, "and it certainly doesn't have all the money it needs to solve all the problems."

After six weeks what finally worked for the Baldrige family was their own perseverance. Julie started a new manufacturing job last week. Brent is still looking. "The only way we're going to get help," he said, "is to help ourselves."

Julie is living with her parents in Vicksburg. Brent and their son are living with a relative in Allegan. They finally moved in with family members after being assured that having their son with them would not make them ineligible for state assistance. In fact they found out the opposite is true. The monthly grant of up to \$500 is available only to families, not single people without children.

Last year, the state legislature refused to extend unemployment benefits another 13 weeks. Democrats are planning another try to extending those benefits. Had the extension been in effect the Baldrige family would still have been getting unemployment help when Julie found her new job. They would probably have been able to save their home.

The question is how much state government can afford to do for unemployed workers. The state is losing tax revenue and cutting back for the same reason people are losing jobs.

Employment analyst Erickcek said the root cause is continuing loss of market share by Detroit-based auto makers and the industry wide layoffs that have resulted. "The state of Michigan government cannot really do much" about that, he said.

He said manufacturing output is still high but companies have had to learn how to do it with fewer workers. That means manufacturing work itself is changing. To stay employed, workers have to learn new skills or perhaps even new jobs in some other field, he said.

"There's no way of sugar coating this," Erickcek said. "For some individuals this is going to be a real crisis."

"I know the government wants to give us retraining," Brent Baldrige said as he continues to look for work.

Erickcek said it will be a "gut wrenching" thing for some people to do. It means, he says, that people in their 40's and 50's who have worked hard in manufacturing jobs all their lives may be forced to not only learn new skills but change careers and work environments. To change "almost everything" about who they thought they were. "What amazes me is that there are people that make that change," he says.

Not only will it be difficult emotionally but practically as well for people to take advantage of proposed state retraining and education programs.

Erickcek told Target 8 Investigators that "you have to survive before you can make the transition." If people are already jobless, homeless and don't know where their next meal is coming from, they are in trouble.

It's something Brent Baldrige learned as he and his family struggled with unemployment. "They want to retrain me," he said, "but I have to have money to do that. I have to have money to survive on to do the training. And the amount the state's offering is not enough to live on."

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Article published Feb 18, 2007

Stories bring faces to area's homeless

Evening News reporter Stephanie Ariganello and photographer Kim Brent recently spent a night at the Salvation Army Warming Center ...

Down the stairs and directly below the chapel in the Salvation Army building at 1018 E. Second St., is where the warming happens. The Salvation Army Warming Center opened in early January, adding another prong to a network of human services in Monroe County aimed at keeping single individuals off the streets or out of their cars when temperatures dip.

The actual center is an open room with long tables and rows of fluorescent lights: essentially, a cafeteria. The yellowed, pink curtains seem excessively frilly. Jesus' presence looms large with paintings on one wall and some crosses on another. A plaque shaped like a stop sign reads: He forgave my sins and He saved my soul.

[See the slideshow "Cold Comfort"](#)

On this particular night, a small group is clustered around the television, people intently watching Tom Hanks lead the surge to save Pvt. Ryan.

"There's your boy. What's his name - Vin Diesel?" Earl McNally says to another man as he hits him on the shoulder. 8:30 p.m., a half hour after the center officially opens, it begins to have the feel of an off-kilter sleepover.

Earl's story

Earl is a 52-year-old man from Carleton who was laid off from his welding job at Lakewood Machine Products late last year. A few weeks without a paycheck and he was living in his truck.

"I been welding for 30 years," he says. "And then I ended up here. This is my 10th night or so. It's a great thing the Salvation Army does. It allows you the rest you need and gives people a chance to survive."

Earl spends his days looking for work.

"I get up, I go to MichiganWorks!, I hope I find something," he says. "I'm a welder. I've been a welder. But I'm not finding anything. I think part of that is due to my age. I go to work part time, helping a friend out with odd jobs around a car dealership for a couple hours a day."

Earl says he never really imagined himself in this position, that just a few years ago he could have picked a job out of the paper and gotten it.

"But I'm here now. I'm doing what I can to keep my dignity. Just within the last year I haven't been able to do what I was able to do before. Psychologically that bothers me.

"But you know, there is always someone worse off."

Rob McCoy, the coordinator of the center, said Earl is an example of exactly why the center is necessary.

"There are some people who will come in here and look for a hand out because they want to or they think that they deserve it because of supposed injustices in their lives, or they've had hard lives," he said. "Someone like Earl, though, is going to come in, use it while he needs to and then move on."

Around 9:30 p.m. Al Kline returns to the warming center, having stormed off earlier. The goulash that was for dinner is starting to congeal while the endless pot of coffee continues to percolate. Donny West, the dedicated volunteer who cooks and cleans and keeps people company five nights out of seven, gathers up coffee mugs to wash out.

Al and Rose's story

"Well, there ain't no one dead yet," says Al as he comes in from the cold. "I just checked under the bridge and ain't no one there, ain't nobody froze today - but that's just speculation because I haven't been out there all day."

Al comes across as a guy who knows people and, while they might be mostly street people, it lends him clout. From the way he presents it, he could be the mayor of the homeless around town.

"I know everyone," he says. "Some of 'em I don't know, know who I am."

He and his lady, Rose Bleeda, whom he refers to as "Ma," are layered up, covered in Carhart and sweatshirts to battle the chill.

On this particular night, Al is angry because he had to go to the hospital earlier. Rose is worried about him. They say he is two shades away from pneumonia and that the doctor told them he has chronic bronchitis.

He holds open his palm when he talks about the cold. Black lines crease his right hand.

"That's frostbite," he says. "That's what I get for being the only one crazy enough to work on cars in weather like this. I'm frostbit from saving old ladies."

Al says he had his own tree trimming business for years and works on the side doing jobs like fixing cars and other repairs. He and Rose dream of returning to his native Montana.

"I don't know, maybe start a cattle ranch," Al says. "First we need to get my truck out or figure out a way to get my tools out there. Then we'll get the kids back."

The kids are Rose's son, age 7, and daughter, age 11, whom Al says he would adopt if given the chance. Rose's kids are staying with her brother in northern Michigan. She hasn't seen them since 2004, which has been the hardest part of being homeless for her.

"It's hard on me some days," she says. "I don't get to see them until we're situated. Holidays are the hardest. All I got to do is get back there."

When she does get to see her kids again, Rose says, "I just want to show them the love they've missed from me."

"And I don't have to see the pain in her face," says Al, getting choked up.

They've been planning the move to Montana for a little over two years. They say they don't have any addictions or alcoholism. The warming center is a place that allows them to come in together, albeit sleep separately, unlike most other shelters that keep men and women completely separated. They say they've been coming to the center since it opened.

As "Saving Private Ryan" continues on, Troy moves closer to the screen, biting off pieces of a candy necklace until it dwindles. The cots are starting to be brought out.

Troy's story

"This is just a stage in my life," he says. "Three weeks from now, I'll be able to look back and appreciate the help I got but not need it anymore."

Troy Cemer, 34, grew up in Grosse Ile and Trenton. He says he's been trying to stay with his girlfriend's mother, but didn't want to continue after about five nights.

"I don't know, I just felt ashamed I guess," he says.

Troy says his situation is different from what he would consider the usual circumstances of homelessness.

"I never had to ask for anything twice - it was always given to me," he says. "That's probably why I'm here now. I never had to work for anything."

Troy says he had been living in an apartment in Flat Rock with his girlfriend and his three children when a dispute with the landlord got them evicted.

"There were cockroaches and we refused to pay rent until they sprayed and got rid of them," he says. The next three weeks are critical for him. He's trying to wait them out at the warming center and the day shelter until he and his girlfriend and the kids can move to Toledo, where he says she's pursuing schooling.

"Once we're there, I don't care," he says. "I'll get whatever job. I'll work in a car wash. I want to feel like I'm doing something."

But he also says he would be happy being a stay-at-home dad, if that was an option. He wouldn't say why he isn't playing that

role at the moment, but that he was looking forward to getting back to their family routine.

As the night wears on, a few more people come into the warming center, spending their time reading, watching the television before lights out or just tucking into a cot for the night.

Around 6 a.m. Mr. McCoy begins yelling to wake people up while Mr. West gets to cooking french toast and oatmeal, setting out a breakfast spread. The sun through the windows banks against the cinder block walls, combating the fluorescent lights, rising over another cold February day.

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Article published Feb 18, 2007

'You might find yourself here'

It comes down to this: We're all about one argument away from needing a place to stay.

And, as Donny West, a dedicated volunteer, pointed out, "... if you don't have family or friends, you might find yourself here."

Here is the Salvation Army Warming Center. It exists to provide a stepping stone between two worlds, to offer safety and warmth while you try to climb out of whatever adversity you may be faced with.

[See the slideshow "Cold Comfort"](#)

The connection we have with our daily lives is tenuous. We can drop down the rabbit hole. We can float along smoothly. We can foist ourselves up the rope in gym class. But in the end, we deal with what we are dealt.

The center, open from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., offers an alternative to traditional homeless shelters. People sign in rather than register. On average, said Maj. Michael Thomas with the Salvation Army, five or six people have been stopping by and waiting out the cold. On really frigid nights, they've had 15 to 20 people come in to get warm.

Earl McNally of Carleton was one who found himself in need.

He said the hardest part of being without a permanent home at this point is knowing that he's "a bum" and the image that conjures.

"It's tough," he said. "I remember I was driving in Detroit to make a delivery a few years ago and I seen a guy sleeping on the stairs all wrapped up. I seen his face and it was all red and purplish looking. It bothered me. Three blocks later I thought I had to go back down. I had this pocket full of change and I was trying to figure out how to give it to this bum without getting out of the truck - full of equipment, I wasn't going to leave it. I rolled down the window and yelled 'hey' and I could see him looking at me."

Earl threw the change in a high arc over the top of the truck, he said, where it rained down upon the man.

"I could tell he was appreciative, you know," he said, visibly agitated as he told the story. He said it's been a difficult thing to confront, and while he's ashamed, he's grabbing at change like that man on the street a few years ago.

Without the warming center, he said, he's afraid he wouldn't have made it through the really cold nights.



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Published February 20, 2007

New Hope center short of money

Homeless care facility may be forced to close

By Susan Vela
Lansing State Journal

Brian Manier wrote New Hope Day Center from prison.

When he was released a few days before Christmas, he made fast tracks to the center's doorsteps at 430 N. Larch St.

New Hope immediately started finding Manier, 48, shelter, food and clothes. Staff members from the center and social service agencies working there with clients also labored to align the documents Manier needs for employment.

They became his friends.

Without the center, "I would have lost hope already," Manier said Thursday, meeting at the center with Regina Kufita of Advent House Ministries.

Yet, some doubt New Hope is helping the homeless to its fullest capabilities.

Volunteers of America has said repeatedly since 2005 that it would have to close the New Hope day shelter. That's when a federal law intended to diminish fraud affected its car donation program.

The change brought in less money for New Hope, Vice President of Operations Patrick Patterson said.



(Photo by BECKY SHINK/Lansing State Journal)

Help needed: Case aide Diane Singleton works the desk at the New Hope Day Center at Volunteers of America.

Patrick Patterson, vice president of operations, said the center will close, possibly by next month, unless the VOA raises \$120,000 in alternative funding.

Letters of support

The homeless have written letters supporting Volunteers of America and the agency's New Hope Day Center. Here are excerpts:

- "I have been able to receive the following services from the Volunteers of America shelter: meals, information regarding AA meetings, etc. Also as a veteran, I received transportation to and from medical appointments, dentist appointments, job interviews, etc."
- "The VOA has helped me with a place to stay, food and clothing. New Hope has helped with a clothing voucher and a warm place to be during the week, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday."
- "In August 2006, I was referred to the Volunteers of America by the VA Medical Center in Battle Creek. To be perfectly honest, after a few days here, I didn't have much faith in their program. As time passed ... I soon learned otherwise. I got involved in (a) program, which is through the Advent House Ministries. There were classes available to me, such as anger management, relapse prevention and job search. I also obtained a 30-day bus pass and eventually received a gas card for my personal vehicle in the amount of \$50. Next, it was determined that I qualified for tenant-based rental assistance. I am presently awaiting inspection approval, which would allow me to move into an apartment any day now."

To help New Hope

- To help New Hope, call (517) 484-4414.

Criticism from city

Some say money issues didn't begin then.

"Even if you look back before that, they still were running out of money," said Joan Jackson Johnson, Lansing's human relations and community services director.

Her department provides \$100,000 a year to New Hope, which center officials said assisted 1,789 homeless individuals in about 25,000 different circumstances last year.

The day shelter may partner with Advent House, Salvation Army, Veterans Affairs and other agencies, but "it's not my vision of a center that would offer hope to the poor and vulnerable in the community," Johnson said.

"There is very little of anything for the guests to do."

Johnson's office also has received criticism from some of the homeless regarding the center. She said they have complained about invasive New Hope requirements, including having to give the last four digits of their Social Security numbers for routine matters such as visiting the bathrooms.

Patterson explained that the VOA was concerned about maintenance costs about a year ago and wanted clients to use the facilities more respectfully. Such criticized practices no longer exist.

Patterson defends the center's reliance on car donations.

New Hope operates on a \$365,000 annual budget.

While about \$250,000 through car gifts once funded the program, Patterson said that level of funding hasn't been available since 2005's "selling price rule."

Patterson said the new law reduced incentives to donate cars because owners now can deduct only the actual amount for which the charitable group sells the car instead of its fair market value.

"It's frustrating to me that people would criticize when the problem is so valid and so big," Patterson said.

He added that the VOA will close New Hope, possibly by next month, if it doesn't raise \$120,000 in alternative funding.

"I might have some good news soon," he said. "We'll just have to see."

Compared to others

Lansing is lucky to have a day shelter that can serve so many, said Michael Stoops of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Washington, D.C., where Stoops is located, has only one meeting city demands.

However, "they should not become dependent on any one funding source," Stoops said.

Horizon House in Indianapolis is similar to New Hope. Executive Director Carter Wolf said the shelter, also a one-stop social service resource, relies very little on car donations.

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He said New Hope's situation "doesn't make any sense."

"If they have really promoted the car thing ... and all of a sudden that dries up, then there's a (funding) diversification problem," Wolf said.

Also, he said, people still can donate cars. The law didn't change that.

Going after dollars

Social service agencies seem to be competing for a shrinking pool of money.

And, when one talks about folding, another ponders stepping forward.

That's the case with the City Rescue Mission, 607 E. Michigan Ave.

Mark Criss, the mission's executive director, plans to open a day shelter for women and children this year in the former Maplewood School.

If New Hope shuts down, the mission most likely would explore providing a men's day shelter and hosting the social service agencies now sending representatives to Patterson's headquarters.

"We will meet that need," Criss said.

Contact Susan Vela at 702-4248 or svela@lsj.com.

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Community service open house slated

By MIKE FORNES

Tribune Staff Writer

CHEBOYGAN - An open house to familiarize the community with leadership and community service available in Cheboygan will be held from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Tuesday.

The Christian Corner Bookstore will host the 2007 annual Cheboygan Ministries and Community Services Open House for all Cheboygan Community Leaders at the new Fraternal Order of Eagles Hall located at 626 N. Main St.

Some of the organizations that will be represented Tuesday are the Hospice of the Straits, the Lord's Kitchen, the Northern Michigan Jail Ministry, the Beacon Center, the Cheboygan Department of Human Services, Cheboygan County United Way, Right to Life, New Hope Christian Counseling, and the Salvation Army. Last year 35 organizations attended the annual event.

"This is a great opportunity to meet other leaders in our community who are committed to serving those in Cheboygan and the surrounding areas," said Laura Derk, who is helping to organize the event. "Faith-based ministries and organizations in attendance will be presenting information about the services they provide. This information can be very helpful in assisting those in need. It is a great time to network and educate ourselves with what our community resources are."

Derk said that the evening's guest speaker will be Keith Agee, a chaplain who is currently serving at the Newberry Correctional Facility.

"He will be addressing our community leaders with some words of encouragement and address what makes a good leader in our community," Derk noted. "He was a professor at Trinity Bible College in North Dakota. He has a great sense of humor and has a heart towards helping those who serve others."

Derk said that special music will be provided by Bill Phillips and there will be a special appearance by the Northern Winds of Worship Liturgical Dance Team.

Refreshments will be served. For further information and reservations, call Derk at 627-7150.

Michigan Report

February 16, 2007

WELFARE CASELOADS DOWN IN JANUARY

After an increase in December, families receiving cash assistance from the state decreased in January, according to reports from the Department of Human Services.

The Family Independence Program had 88,472 cases in January, down from 88,795 cases in December. There were 87,197 cases in November. The cases represented 239,778 people, down from 240,659 people and 236,137 people in November.

The Food Assistance Program showed a 16th straight month on increase, with 552,135 households representing 1.199 million people. December had 550,235 households representing 1.196 million people.

Childcare cases also climbed again in January to 61,174 cases representing 115,577 children. In December there were 61,078 cases representing the same amount of children. In November there were 60,626 cases representing 114,494 children.

The number of people required to work reporting income held at 29 percent, a recent low. The percent of cases exceeding the federal 60-month limit continued to hold at 10 percent.



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Published February 18, 2007

Priorities: Don't let budget battles derail response to endangered children

A Lansing State Journal editorial

Somehow, someday these stories have to stop.

A child is dead. An adult who should have protected the child is, instead, imprisoned for causing the child's death. Another parent is deemed to have not properly cared for her child.

And the state's Children's Ombudsman's Office is again left to investigate the actions of state workers charged with child protection.

This particular case involves the death of little Anishia Moy. A few months ago, it was little Ricky Holland's death that was at the center of court cases and headlines.

As horrible, as frightening as these cases are, what really terrifies is what we do not know. How many children are in danger or suffering at the hands of those who should love and protect them?

In December, we called on Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature to make child protection issues a top priority at the Capitol in 2007. In recent weeks, of course, the political energy has gone into Michigan's huge budget and tax questions.

Lawmakers must not let the fiscal emergency crowd out the social crisis.

Last summer, Granholm and the Legislature agreed to spend the money to hire more child protection workers. Where is the momentum now, though?

The end of the year was consumed by a turf battle over the ombudsman's office.

As part of her effort to close an \$800 million budget deficit, Granholm just issued executive orders to cut, among many other things, foster care payments this year. For the next budget year, Granholm calls for \$40 million to hire additional child welfare workers and find permanent homes for foster children.

We have no doubt that the governor and lawmakers want to do more to protect vulnerable children. Yet we are allowing circumstances to drive us away from that goal; allowing circumstances to force us into settling for limited measures.

Something far more bold is required if we don't want more Ricky Hollands and Anishia Moys; or more children who are deprived or hurt in ways that do not make the headlines.

We said it in December and we'll say it again: We're not making progress in child-rearing.

To make budgets fit revenues, Michigan citizens must be ready to live with a variety of reduced

services or a variety of increased taxes or both.

But somehow, someday, child protection must remain at the top of the public agenda.

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Article published Feb 18, 2007

Granholm discusses the issues - with video interview clips

Editor's note: The following is a partial transcript of Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm's interview with the Daily Press & Argus on Thursday.

On her budget proposal calling for a 2 percent tax on services, and the state budget in general:

We've cut and cut and cut. I have contributed to this loss of revenue. I've signed into law 93 business tax cuts that have caused revenue to decline in the hopes, like we all have, that if you cut taxes enough it's going to stimulate economic growth and we will have businesses coming here and staying here.

Unfortunately ... Michigan is a prototype for this shift that's occurring globally. We in Michigan or we in the United States, we are never going to be the cheapest place on the planet to do business. So when manufacturers can choose to leave — and go to Mexico and China for 50 cents an hour or \$1.50 a day — they're going to do that because the technology permits them to do it. It's much cheaper, and the world has shrunk because of all that.

... Taxes are important, but they may not be the only important thing ... The consideration for Google is talent. They're looking for the best workers, and that 21st century kind of business is what we are excited about having. We've got to strategically think about what it is that will cause that kind of worker to be here and grow here and those kinds of businesses to come here ...

You just can't cut \$3 billion out of a \$9 billion general fund without doing really significant harm to the state, to public safety, health care and education.

Over the past four years, we've resolved \$4 billion in budget deficits. But of that \$4 billion, \$3 billion have been in cuts. Our administration has cut more than any other governor in the history of Michigan to try to live within our means ... But we're at a point now where we're fraying around the edges, more than fraying. The challenges that you're seeing, for example, in the Department of Human Services, being able to monitor the foster-care homes so that we don't have Ricky Hollands.

Since 2002, we've lost 7,000 employees due to early outs and retirement. Three thousand of the 7,000 were in the Department of Human Services. We're going to make children unsafe because we just don't have the bodies to monitor the caseloads.

... It's the same with what we're seeing on revenue sharing, and it's the same thing with the schools. We have a number of districts teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

So the question for us is: What kind of state do we want Michigan to be — and are we willing to do what we need to do to get there? And when I say what we need to do, are we willing to make the cuts, because I have another \$400 million in cuts that I've asked the Legislature to consider; the restructuring, because I think we have to consolidate and share services and encourage that governmental restructuring to happen; the third thing is to seek the revenues that we need to prioritize, to invest in our citizens, invest in creating the kind of work force and diversification of our state that is necessary to attract the businesses and not be so reliant on one particular sector.

There are basically six pieces to this tax restructuring ... First, we are proposing a replacement for the Single Business Tax. That business tax replacement has basically three elements in it. It taxes assets, gross receipts and profits. The level of the rate on those are the lowest rate in the country for all three ... We've cut the personal property tax in half in that. We've offered a \$250 mil tax cut for small businesses ... There's one other tax cut we have included in the Michigan Business Tax, we are offering a \$250 million headquarters credit for companies that choose to headquarter in Michigan ...

The second piece is this two-penny tax on services. The reason why we went to this, there's been a lot of discussion about can you do an income tax (increase), can you do a progressive income tax (increase). If you mess with the way the income tax is configured, you have to go to a constitutional amendment, and that can't happen until 2008. This is a crisis that needs to be addressed right now. People have said, "Why don't you just take up one penny on the sales tax?" Same thing, you need a constitutional amendment to be able to do that.

So the thing we can do, we can either raise the income tax overall, just take that up back to where it was in 2000, or if you wanted to spread it more evenly between individuals and business, you do a two-penny tax on services, which ends up being spread more evenly between the two, about 50-50. The two pennies ends up being ... (an average of) \$1.33 per month.

We are asking for the Legislature to decouple our estate tax. We used to have an estate tax. We don't have an estate tax anymore. We're asking to take it up to \$2 million, so anybody who inherits over \$2 million would essentially get an average 5 percent tax on the value of that estate. We would exempt out small business and family farms.

Sin taxes, those are smaller amounts. Eliminating certain loopholes. Right now, the SBT has all these bizarre loopholes. We said, "Let's just get rid of the loopholes so that it's fair across the board."

We want to give (people) a sales tax break if they trade in their vehicles. Right now, you have to pay full sales tax on the (new) car. We want to eliminate that, and have them just pay sales tax on the difference (between the trade-in and new car). They can get a significant benefit from trading in their car. It stimulates, hopefully, some automotive sales. For an average citizen, whereas you might end up having to pay \$13 a year on the two-penny sales tax, this is a break of about \$630 per transaction ...

The real question for us is not really the nitty-gritty of the budget or the nitty-gritty of the taxes ... but this is a moment for us all to step back and say, "What is it that Michigan ought to be? What is it we ought to become?" ... We've got to have a quality place to live and do business and visit.

On Republican opposition to her budget:

I'm interested to hear what their plan is. They can't just say "no." We've put a specific plan on table, we've got unanimous support from Democrats in the House and Senate. ...

If they think they can do it all in cuts, I'd like to see where they want to cut without hurting schools. ...

You could let every single prisoner out of jail and you still wouldn't come up with \$3 billion. You could cut all of the seniors and children off of health care, and cut everybody off of mental health, and you still would not reach the amount of money this deficit needs.

On the possibility of midyear cuts to schools:

The jeopardy here is there will be massive cuts, not even midyear, it's almost sort of three-quarters into the year by the time this ends up shaking out. For the schools, that is a huge cut for them at the end of the year. ... I'm not sure how they would get there.

Technically, it is virtually an impossibility to do this for them. I'm not interested in doing this ... I'm not going to sign something that cuts them in the middle of the year. We're going to have to figure out a way to make them whole, and have a discussion with the Legislature about what that is.

On asking for a tax increase in a poor economy:

It's extremely hard. So what's the alternative? You slash schools in the middle of the year? These are the tough choices we're going to have to make as a state. When it's a cup of coffee a month per person on average versus slashing your schools in the middle of year or cutting your parents off of Medicaid? People need to know what the real consequences are of cuts.

On her job-training proposal:

We've got 84,000 vacancies, the vacancies that require some kind of training or certification. We've got all these people who are unemployed.

Let's get them into short-term training programs through the community colleges and get them placed in vacancies.

We have a skills gap right now, and we need to fill that skill gap. This is a one-time offer. Three years and it's done, first come, first served.

On teacher retirement and health-care costs:

Everybody has to come to the table with solutions that will cut costs. I think that it is a very difficult issue for (the Michigan Educational Association teachers' union) to pull back on benefits. But everybody is on the same page with trying to find a cheaper way to provide those benefits... I am eager to hear solutions that would allow us to reduce costs.

There was some legislation in last go-round which essentially took MESSA, the health-care organization for the MEA, out of the loop and allowed for others to go in. That ends up reducing competition. You want competition to exist.

Right now, districts have the ability to go outside MESSA, and they should do it if they think they can get a better deal... The law allows for that to occur.

On organized labor:

We're undergoing a big paradigm shift there as well. The UAW, as an example, can be a broker of great skill in an ad-vanced manufacturing context. They know better than anybody the cost of going head to head with management as opposed to working with the company to make them more successful ...

There is happening now a re-cognition both inside and outside the union that the old rules in new global economy don't apply anymore.

On a proposal to increase the gas tax:

I acknowledge we are challenged on the amount of road funding, but my priority is getting the fiscal house of the state in order first. I believe there are other ways to be able to go about getting additional funding ... We're still very low on the state per capita list on what we get (back from the federal government) ...

We don't have all the revenues and resources we need right now to have a first-class road system. At some point, we're going to have to look at it.

On the proposed Latson Road interchange at Interstate 96, which has been added, deleted and added again to the state's list of road projects:

We're heading down that path. We made some little steps in that direction.

We dealt with this last year. We at least put it back on the list of projects to be able to be done. I know they're going to do the bridge. If the locals can help to acquire the rights of way, it can move more quickly. We really do have limited resources. Perhaps there's a way to get more federal assistance on it on an earmark.

I certainly see a need for it. It's an important interchange, and this is an important community. It's significant to be able to do this for economic purposes.

On the Island Lake State Recreation Area gun range controversy, in which residents accuse the state of violating the township ordinance on noise:

I've had lengthy conversations with the (Department of Natural Resources) on this ...

I'm interested in doing what the law says can be done, and to mitigate the sound so they have a good quality of life ...

So what else can we do to mitigate the noise so they can have a decent quality of life? I'm very interested in having the court help us in figuring out a way to get there.



Bush budget would slash funds for Macomb's poor

Reps. Levin, Miller say it has little chance of passing

By Chad Selweski

Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Macomb County would take a big hit in funding for numerous programs that aid the poor under the federal budget proposed by President Bush.

The president's \$2.9 trillion spending plan calls for the elimination of a grant program that maintains self-sufficiency for the "working poor," helping them through financial crises so that they don't end up on the welfare rolls.

"These people are in dire straits," said Frank Taylor, director of the Macomb County Community Services Agency, which oversees the effort. "The job market is sour, bills are piling up, and they have no place else to go. They're at the bitter end."

MCCSA provides temporary assistance to thousands of Macomb low-income families, assisting them with food, utility bills, rent and mortgage payments, transportation, and referrals to doctors.

Other programs facing Bush cutbacks supply funding for clean-water projects, roads, sidewalks, parks, senior centers and housing rehabilitation. The Community Development Block Grant program, which allots \$5.3 million to the county and Macomb's largest municipalities, would suffer a 20 percent cutback.

U.S. Rep. Sander Levin said he's especially concerned with a proposed 37 percent cut for a low-interest loan program that finances local sewer improvement projects. That federal fund has provided more than \$143 million over the last six years for projects that prevented sewage overflows into Lake St. Clair.

"This has been really critical to Macomb County, for what it's meant to the communities. This is really the only federal clean-water fund. We are going to fight this (cut) to the end," said Levin, a Royal Oak Democrat who represents most of the county.

The largest item on the chopping block for Macomb is the Community Services Block Grant, which allocates \$788,000 to MCCSA for assistance to 3,100 households.

Similar cuts have been unsuccessfully proposed by the administration in each of the past two years, prompting budget worries among officials across the county. But Taylor said that, with Democrats in control of Congress and Bush's approval ratings low, he believes the chances of the president's budget passing are "slim to none."

Yet, while dodging the budget ax in the past, MCCSA has experienced flat federal funding over five years. Nearly 90 percent of the agency's \$15 million annual budget is supplied by Washington.

"We are at the mercy of the feds," Taylor said.

Each of the MCCSA programs carries income eligibility requirements and many of the services are offered through three Community Action Centers -- in Warren, Mount Clemens and New Haven -- which would be closed under the Bush plan.

The food program alone serves nearly 3,000 people per month, many of whom are seniors earning less than \$13,000 a year. The Head Start preschool program handles 842 low-income children and has a waiting list of 220. The home heating-assistance program helped 4,200 households last year, with aid provided to low-income and fixed-income families, as well as the disabled.

Congressional supporters of the Bush budget say it offers solid funding for defense, homeland security and education while proceeding toward the president's long-term goal of a balanced budget by 2012.

Levin counters that Congress can demonstrate fiscal responsibility while maintaining "the right priorities," in contrast to Bush's proposed cuts.

Republican Rep. Candice Miller, a former Harrison Township supervisor, said she knows firsthand that the Community Development Block Grant program helps communities finance valuable neighborhood projects.

"Particularly in Michigan, with the economic challenges and the loss of state revenue sharing dollars, that (federal cut) would be an especially hard blow for the municipalities," she said. "But the Bush budget plan has little -- if not no -- chance of passing. The budget that will emerge will be completely unrecognizable compared to this budget."

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Senate Passes Continuing Resolution for Balance of FY 2007 without Amendment

On February 14, the Senate voted 81-15 to approve the \$463.5 billion fiscal year 2007 omnibus appropriations spending bill. The vote came one day before the expiration of a previous continuing resolution (CR) that had been enacted last December and that had funded most government departments and agencies at FY 2006 levels. The House had approved the bill by a 286-140 vote on January 31. Although the Senate passed the House version without amendments, Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) indicated that some of the issues that senators would have included in amendments may be considered in the upcoming emergency war supplemental spending bill (see following article). Although most programs will continue to be funded at FY 2006 levels, the new CR increases funding for federally qualified health centers by approximately \$207 million, bringing total funding to \$1.9 billion. The increase will help finance more than 300 new or expanded health centers. Within this total, \$25 million is allocated for base adjustments for existing health centers. The CR funds Ryan White CARE Grants at approximately \$1.2 billion, an increase of \$75.8 million; the increase will help states disadvantaged by the new formula in the reauthorized program. The CR also has an increase of \$495 million for the Public Health and Social Services Emergency programs, which include hospital preparedness grants, bioterrorism training and curriculum development, and credentialing/emergency systems for advance registration of volunteer health professionals. The CR would also increase funding to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) by \$52 million to prevent shutting down the 1-800-MEDICARE call centers for the final months of the fiscal year and \$15.9 billion for the Real Choice Systems Change Grants for states.

The CR also modifies the Older Americans Act Elderly Meal Programs by providing a \$20 million increase for Meals on Wheels and other senior nutrition programs. The amount would restore last year's across-the-board cut and provide a small increase to offset inflation and a growing elderly population. Finally, the CR places a prohibition on funds being used to finalize or implement proposed Workforce Investment Act (WIA) or Wagner-Peyser Act regulations. Last month, the Department of Labor released a proposed rule that makes policy changes to WIA and Wagner-Peyser regulations. This rule shifts some of the decision-making responsibilities of the program up to the state level; requires full collaboration between WIA One-Stops and Wagner-Peyser services; removes the requirement that Wagner-Peyser services be provided by "merit employees"; makes changes to the WIA board membership, functions, and planning processes; eliminates the higher standard of review for certain waiver requests; opens up Individual Training Accounts to youth ages 16-17 and the role of "alternative entities" with youth councils; and formalizes the process of intermediaries and sub-contractors. The bill has been sent to the president for signature.

Members of Congress, Stakeholder Groups Highlight SCHIP Funding Needs

This week, Congress also received President Bush's request for supplemental emergency funding, largely for the Iraq war. On February 14, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) expressed interest in using the supplemental as a vehicle to address the expected shortfalls in the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) for the remainder of this year. Senate leaders indicated the supplemental is a "last resort" if both parties cannot agree on a stand-alone interim SCHIP funding measure. The Senate expects to take up the supplemental funding bill in late March or early April. Also this week, the House and Senate Budget Committees were the target for constituencies seeking to expand resources for SCHIP. Two groups of members in the House, the bipartisan Main Street/Blue Dog Coalition and the Congressional Black Caucus, sent their respective letters to leaders of the House Budget Committee urging them to allocate adequate SCHIP funding in their FY 2008 budget proposal. A diverse coalition of 55 advocacy, provider and other stakeholder groups also sent a letter to the budget committees requesting \$60 billion over five years to cover the costs of insuring current SCHIP enrollees and all those eligible for SCHIP and Medicaid but not currently enrolled. A copy of the advocacy coalition's letter is available online at [here](#).

On February 14, the House Energy and Commerce Committee held the first of a two-part hearing on children's health insurance in general and SCHIP reauthorization specifically; it was the committee's first SCHIP hearing in the 110th Congress. Witnesses discussed the success of SCHIP, challenges associated with the program's funding level, and the value of providing access to affordable coverage for parents among other issues. A transcript of the hearing will be available [here](#).

Senate HELP Committee Approves Head Start Reauthorization Bill

On February 14, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee approved the Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (S. 556). The bill was introduced on February 12 by Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), Ranking Member Michael Enzi (R-Wyo.), Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), and Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.). The bill would authorize funding of \$6.9 billion in the current fiscal year, \$7.3 billion in FY 2008, \$7.6 billion in FY 2009, \$7.9 billion in FY 2010, and such sums as necessary through FY 2012. It

would create a new state advisory council on early care and education in each state with members to include representatives from several state agencies, including child care and health or mental health, among a list of 26 other agencies or groups. The bill also would increase the eligibility level from 100 percent to 130 percent of the federal poverty level; double the Early Head Start set-aside, which would phase up to 20 percent over five years; and require submission of an annual audit of administrative expenses to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The bill is pending full Senate consideration; the House has not yet introduced a companion bill. The Head Start program was last reauthorized through FY 2003, but Congress has continued funding through the annual appropriations process. The legislation will be available at <http://thomas.loc.gov/>.

House Budget Committee Members Criticize Food Stamp Eligibility Contracting

On February 15, the House Budget Committee held a hearing to review the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) FY 2008 budget request. Committee Chairman John M. Spratt Jr. (D-S.C.) and committee members asked extensive questions of the main witness, USDA Secretary Mike Johanns. Reps. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) and Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas) criticized a pending contract in Indiana under which a private company would take over most Food Stamp Program (FSP) eligibility activities next month and a similar contract in Texas that has been operating in several counties. DeLauro and Doggett said that the Texas operation has been costly and has diminished, rather than improved, FSP service to recipients, and that they anticipate the Indiana contract will have the same results if it goes forward. DeLauro said she understands the USDA has requested answers to a number of questions about the Indiana contract, and asked Johanns if he would see that they were satisfactorily answered before approving the contract; he responded that the USDA would ensure that the state complies fully with the law in carrying out the contract. A second panel that testified before the committee included Deborah Frank, director of the Grow Clinic for Children at Boston Medical Center, and Denise Holland, executive director of the Harvest Hope Food Bank in Columbia, S.C. Both described extensive need among families they see and urged the committee to oppose FSP cuts in the Administration's FY 2008 budget. More information is available [here](#).

Obey Criticizes Administration's FY 2008 Budget Request

On February 14, House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-Wis.) issued a news release comparing the president's FY 2008 budget request to the joint FY 2007 funding measure recently passed in the House and the Senate. According to Obey, the overall FY 2008 funding request for HHS is \$63.2 billion, a \$758 million decrease below the joint funding resolution, causing cuts such as an \$83 million decrease for substance abuse prevention and treatment programs and a \$77 million decrease to mental health programs. The analysis also praises the administration for a \$5.4 billion request for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, an increase of \$182 million. It criticizes the budget for passing on \$145 million in administrative costs to states, and notes that such a proposal has been routinely rejected by Congress. The release also cites the cuts to the Community Services Block Grant and the Social Services Block Grant and the impact this would have on "child care, job training, emergency food and rent assistance, home weatherization, and other critical services for low-income families." The document is available [here](#).

Chambliss Bill Would Update Food Stamp Resource Rules

On February 14, Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, introduced the Food Stamp Savings and Investment Act of 2007. The bill would index the FSP asset limit to inflation; during a committee hearing last month, Chambliss noted that the asset limit had not been updated for more than 20 years. It would also exempt savings plans for retirement and education from being counted toward assets; a similar provision is included in the administration's farm bill proposal (see This Week, February 2). Cosponsors include Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), the committee's chair, and Sens. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.), Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.). More information is available [here](#).

Senate HELP Committee Passes Mental Health Parity Legislation

On February 14, the Senate HELP Committee approved a bill to improve health insurance coverage of mental illness by a vote of 18-3. The Mental Health Parity Act of 2007 was introduced in the Senate on February 12 by HELP Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy, Ranking Member Michael Enzi and Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.). The bill would require insurance companies to cover mental illness as they do physical ailments. Businesses with fewer than 50 employees would be exempt from the bill's requirements. The bill does not mandate that group health plans provide any mental health coverage. However, if a plan does offer mental health coverage, then the plan or coverage must ensure that the financial requirements applied to mental health benefits are no more restrictive than the financial requirements applied to substantially all medical and surgical benefits that the plan covers. Such financial requirements include deductibles, co-payments, co-insurance, out-of-pocket expenses, and annual and lifetime limits. The plan may not establish separate cost-sharing requirements that are only applicable to mental health benefits. Unlike previous mental health parity legislation, the bill includes substance abuse as a mental illness. Although no mental health parity legislation has ever made it all the way through the legislative process, supporters are hopeful that this bill will succeed. [The bill is available here](#).

Prescription Drug Fraud and Abuse Subject of House Hearing, GAO Report

On February 9, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee held a hearing on the fraud and abuse problems in prescription drug prices within government programs. Patrick O'Connell, chief of the Civil Medicaid Fraud Section in the Texas attorney general's office, testified that Texas was the first state to intervene in a qui tam lawsuit—sometimes referred to as a "whistleblower lawsuit"—involving pharmaceutical manufacturer pricing fraud and has aggressively pursued those claims. He noted that while Congress has taken important steps to curb this fraud in Medicare and Medicaid, there are still some manufacturers that defraud Medicaid. O'Connell also discussed rebate fraud and off-label marketing fraud. He urged the committee to examine the need for strong false claims acts and administrative rules to hold manufacturers accountable. In conjunction with the hearing, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a new report, Prescription Drugs: Oversight of Drug Pricing in Federal Programs. John Dicken, GAO's director of health care, testified that there are inadequacies in oversight of the Medicaid drug rebate program by the CMS, specifically with the prices manufacturers report to the CMS to determine the statutorily required rebates owed to states. Dicken also reported on the inadequate oversight of the 340B drug program and the lack of transparency in the maximum prices, as well as the numerous potential opportunities for fraud and abuse in the new Medicare Part D program. The report is available [here](#). [Testimony is available here](#).

Rep. Norwood Dies; Long-time Advocate for Patients' Bill of Rights

On February 13, Rep. Charles Norwood (R-Ga.) died at age 65 after losing a battle with lung cancer. He was a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and was perhaps best known for authoring legislation that would create a "patient's bill of rights" (PBR). Although PBR legislation passed the House several times in previous years, a compromise was never reached with the Senate. On February 12, Norwood reintroduced the legislation and indicated that he was passing the torch to his original co-author, Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), now chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee.

APHSA Releases Report on Extending Medicaid for Former Foster Youth

On February 15, APHSA released a report, Medicaid Access for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care. The report covers information on current Medicaid programs, including the Chafee option, that are being used to cover foster youth who have aged out of care; cost estimates associated with providing this coverage; and how states may be able to use the Deficit Reduction Act benefits flexibility option to create a program for these youth. Members of the National Association of State Medicaid Directors (NASMD) and the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA), both affiliates of APHSA, collaborated to provide and verify the information contained in the new report. The report is based on responses from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and [can be accessed here](#).